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Raksha Bandhan



In India, festivals are the celebration of togetherness the celebrations of being one of the family. Raksha Bandhan is one such festival that is all about affection, fraternity and sublime sentiments. It is also known as Raksha Bandhan which means a 'bond of protection'. This is an occasion to flourish love, care, affection and sacred feeling of brotherhood.

The Meaning of Raksha Bandhan.

Relationships are the essence of celebration and it holds true for any Indian festival. Each festival brings the family together which calls for a total festive environment. Raksha Bandhan is a celebration of one such relation - the relation of a brother and a sister. The relation is no where so celebrated as in India. Raksha Bandhan is a festival which celebrates the bond of affection between brothers and sisters. It is a day when the siblings pray for each others' well being and wish for each others' happiness and goodwill.

The name 'Raksha Bandhan' suggests 'a bond of protection'. On this auspicious day, brothers make a promise to their sisters to protect them from all harms and troubles and the sisters pray to God to protect their brother from all evil. The festival falls on the Shravan Purnima which comes generally in the month of August. Sisters tie the silk thread called Rakhi on their brother's wrist and pray for their well being and brothers promise to take care of their sisters.

Importance of Raksha Bandhan

In ancient times a woman tied a 'rakshaa' on her husband's wrist to protect him from evil. Gradually this changed; she tied a 'rakshaa' on her brother's right wrist, to protect him from evil influence and those factors which may taint his character, and to strengthen the bond of sibling love between them. On the occasion of Rakshaa Bandhan she visits her brother's home and performs his 'pujan' by applying kumkum and rice grains on his forehead. In return the brother gives her a gift and vows to protect her too. The 'rakhadi' for rakshaa bandhan itself ranges from a coloured cotton string to exquisitely decorated balls of various sizes and materials such as fluffy cotton, 'zari' paper, tinsel, beads and so on.

On Rakshaa Bandhan a second importance relates to 'Baleva' and our devotion to the Lord. Just as Bali Raja offered devotion to Lord Narayan by sacrificing his kingdom and himself, devotees should endeavor to emulate him. That is the true spirit of Baleva.

Rakshaa bandhan day is important for the priests too, as they tie rakhis on their patrons wrist and in return receive offerings from them. In some parts of the country it is customary to draw figures on the walls of their home and worship them with offerings of vermilion and kheer. The imprints of palms are also put on either side of the entrance and rakhis are stuck on them as part of rakshaa bandhan rituals. Some parts of India also reserve Rakshaa Bandhan day importance for the sacred thread changing ceremony when the young brahmin boys discard the old one and don a new one ritualistically. However, on rakshaa bandhan it is the emotions which are important. The rakshaa bandhan ceremony performed is the symbolic everlasting bond between brothers and sisters that reinforces ties between them even across continents, and it is the one which has the most importance on this auspicious day.

History

There are many references to the significance of the Rakhi festival in Vaishnava theology. Many of these significant historical facts are still not known or recorded.

Vritra-Indra

The origin of this festival is usually traced back to the historical incidents of Indra's fight with Vritra-Indra that resulted in Indra's loss. Then, his wife had tied a thread around his wrist and empowered it with divine powers to make sure Indra emerged victorious in the duel that followed.

Krishna and Draupadi

Another incident is the one from the epic Mahabharat that concerns Krishna and Draupadi, the wife of the

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Pandavas. She had torn a strip of silk off her sari and tied it around Krishna's index finger to stop the flow of blood. Krishna was so touched by her action that He found himself bound to her by love. He promised to repay the debt and then spent the next 25 years doing just that. Draupadi in spite of being married to 5 great warriors and being a daughter of a powerful monarch trusted and depended wholly on Krishna.

Krishna repaid the debt of love during "Vastra-Haran"(literally "clothing-theft") of Draupadi. Draupadi's "Vastra-Haran" was done in the assembly of King Dhritarashtra, when Yudhishtir, her husband lost her in gamble. At that time Krishna indefinitely extended her saree, so it could not be removed, to save her pride. This is how He paid his debt towards rakhi tied to Him by Draupadi.

King Bali and Goddess Lakshmi

According to a legend the Demon King Bali was a great devotee of Lord Vishnu. Lord Vishnu had taken up the task to guard his kingdom leaving his own abode in Vaikunth. Goddess Lakshmi wished to be with her lord back in her abode. She went to Bali disguised as a Brahmin woman to seek refuge till her husband came back. During the Shravan Purnima celebrations, Lakshmi tied the sacred thread to the King. Upon being asked she revealed who she was and why she was there. The king was touched by her goodwill for his family and her purpose and requested the Lord to accompany her. He sacrificed all he had for the Lord and his devoted wife. Thus the festival is also called Baleva that is Bali Raja's devotion to the Lord. It is said that since then it has been a tradition to invite sisters in Shravan Purnima for the thread tying ceremony or the Raksha Bandhan.

Yama and the Yamuna

According to another legend, Raksha Bandhan was a ritual followed by Lord Yama (the Lord of Death) and his sister Yamuna. Yamuna tied rakhi to Yama and bestowed immortality. Yama was so moved by the serenity of the occasion that he declared that whoever gets a rakhi tied from his sister and promised her protection will become immortal.

Alexander the great - Puru According to some accounts, Alexander, the king of Greece invaded India in 326 B.C. He married an Indian lady, Roxana (Roshanak) to cement his relations with the new Central Asian regions. Alexander's wife sent a sacred thread to Porus, asking him not to harm her husband in battle. In accordance with Hindu traditions, Porus gave full respect to the rakhi. On the battlefield, when Porus was about to deliver a final blow to Alexander, he saw the rakhi on his wrist and restrained himself from attacking Alexander personally.

Rani Karnavati - Humayun

The story of Rani Karnavati of Chittor and Mughal Emperor Humayun is the most significant evidence in the history. During the medieval era, around the 15th century, there were many wars between the Rajputs, Mughals and Sultans. Rakhi at that time meant a spiritual binding and protection of sisters was foremost. When Rani Karnavati the widowed queen of the king of Chittor realised that she could in no way defend the invasion of the Sultan of Gujarat, Bahadur Shah, she sent a rakhi to Emperor Humayun. The Emperor was so touched by the gesture, that he abandoned an ongoing military campaign to ride to her rescue.

Celebrations

Generally, the fancy Rakhis and delicious sweets are prepared long before the Shravana Purnima. According to the Indian tradition, the family members get ready for the rituals early in the morning. They take a bath to purify mind and body before starting any preparations. Sisters prepare the puja thali which consists of roli, tilak, Rakhi threads, rice grains, aggarbattis (incense sticks), diyas and sweets. After offering the rituals to the deities of the family, the sister perform aarti of their brothers and ties Rakhi on their wrist. Then, they put kumkum powder on the forehead of their brother and offer sweets. All these rituals take place amid the chanting of the following mantras :

"Suraj shakhan chhodian, Mooli chhodia beej
Behen ne rakhi bandhi / Bhai tu chir jug jee",

Which means "The sun radiates its sunlight, the radish spreads its seeds,
I tie the rakhi to you O brother and wish that may you live long."

After her prayer for a long life for her brother, she says that she is tying the ever-protective Raksha to her brother's wrist and chants:

"Yena baddho Balee raajaa daanavendro mahaabalah
tena twaam anubadhnaami rakshe maa chala maa chala"

This means, " I tie you the rakhi that was tied to king Bali, the king of Demons,
O Rakhi I pray that you never falter in protecting your devotee.

In return, brothers pamper and blesses the sisters and promises to protect her from all the evils of this world. He also present a token of his love and affection as a Rakhi gift. The rituals performed on Raksha Bandhan may differ from place to place but they carry the same aura throughout the globe.

Rakhi Purnima

The festival is also known as Rakhi Purnima as it falls on the full moon day of the Hindu month 'Shravana'. The month of Shravana is the month of gods and pujans (worships) and the full moon day being the most important day of all. Rakhi Purnima is important in more than one way. Since, the festival is celebrated in many states, it is known with many names and rituals but the only thing that does not change is the prayer and pledge for the protection of siblings. Different regions have different beliefs pertaining to Raksha Bandhan and follow different rituals.

Avani Avittam in South India

In South India, Raksha Bandhan is called Avani Avittam. The festival is important for Brahmins. They first take a holy bath and then change their holy thread (Janeyu) amid chanting the mantras. They take a pledge to perform the brahmanik duties as prescribed in the holy books and adopt a good conduct and dignity. The Janeyu is a representation of the vow for adherence to vedic culture, observance of Hindu traditions and service to humanity. The ceremony is called Shrivani or Rishi Tarpan. All Brahmins celebrate it in the same way.

Kajari Purnima in North India

Kajari Purnima is the name by which the festival of Rakhi is known in North India. The festival is celebrated when wheat and barley are sown in this region. Goddess Bhagwati is worshipped and farmers seek her blessings for a good crop. The name Baleva signifies the might of King Bali and his devotion to lord Vishnu and Goddess Laxmi.

Narial Purnima

This festival is important for those who depend on sea for their life. On this day the Sea God, Varun is worshiped. The coconuts are offered to the Sea God thus the name Narial purnima or the coconut full moon. It is the time of retreating monsoon. The skies are clearing, the tides are receding, the sea is less violent. It is the festival time for the people of the coastal areas. The people offer coconut to Lord Varun to invoke blessings and offer thanks giving.

For the fishermen it is the beginning of the new fishing season. During the monsoon the seas are more violent. The fishermen don't wade into seas during this time. Shraavan Purnima signifies the end of Monsoon. The Fishermen decorate their boats, paint it new and put flags. They then carry decorated coconuts to the sea. It is kind of a community gathering there. They celebrate together, sing and dance together. In the end they worship the Sea God and offer coconut. The decorated coconuts are thrown in the water with prayers of a plentiful fish catch.

Why Coconut?

A coconut has three eyes. It is said to represent Lord Shiva, the three eyed God. Coconut is considered to be an auspicious offering to Gods. A coconut is broken in front of the deities before taking up a new venture to seek blessings and on successful completion for thanks giving. Coconut is important for all religious occasions. Thus coconut is considered to be an ideal offering to the Sea God as well. Pieces of coconut and coconut are distributed as 'prasad'. Coconut rice is the main dish on this day.

Pavitropana

Pavitropana is a festival of Gujaratis. It is celebrated on the very same day of Rakhi Purnima and falls in the month of Shrivana. According to the legends, Gujaratis are the staunch believers of religion and generally they worship lord Shiva. On this auspicious day, most of the people offer water to the Shivalingas in the nearby temples, offer prayers to Lord Shiva and seek his blessings. It is believed that whoever, prays on this auspicious day, all his past sins are forgiven.

Pavitropana or the Shrivana Purnima is considered as an auspicious day for the final poojan of the three eyed God. In the Pavitropana ceremony, a few twisted filaments of cotton are soaked in panchagaivya (mixture of cow's ghee, milk, curd, urine and excreta) and then fastened around the Shivalinga. Panchagaivya or the five products obtained from cow which is the most sacred animal according to the Hindu mythology.

Janyo Punyo

The people of the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand, celebrate Raksha Bandhan and Janyo punyo on the Shrivani Purnima, it is a day on which people change their janeu (sacred thread). On this day the famous Bagwal fair is held at Devidhura in district Champawat. Punyo in Kumauni means Purnima or full moon it is the purnima in which the sacred thread Janeu or Janyo is ceremonically changed. The Raksha Bandhan celebrations are same as in all across North India.

Kajari Purnima

In central parts of India such as Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Jharkand and Bihar this day is celebrated as Kajari Purnima. It is an important day for the farmers and women blessed with a son. On the ninth day after Shrivana Amavasya, the preparations of the Kajari festival start. This ninth day is called Kajari Navami and varied rituals are performed by women who have sons until Kajri Purnima or the full moon day.



